

Transcript of Podcast 065: Detroit

{Intro:

DAYNA: Detroit has a scary reputation but it's also really interesting and I think ppl should give it more of a chance than they do.

}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'whys' behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

I hope January treated you well and February treats you better. Did you make any new year resolutions? I have to say I've never been one for New Year Resolutions - I once made a resolution not to make resolutions and, well, I guess that's been the only one I've ever stuck to. Though that's a bit of a cheat. I am aware of this.

While not a resolution, something I didn't keep to was the co-attempt at early morning yoga. As you may remember, I was the accountability buddy for my friend Kate-Frankie. I remained her accountability buddy, but I was unable to continue doing the yoga myself. Not out of choice I may add.

It was weird. I did Parkrun on 21st January, finally I managed to do my 50th Parkrun, for which I got a rather dodgy metallic badge that though says '50' on it, does not refer to Parkrun in any way so anyone looking at it might assume that the wearer was, in fact, celebrating their 50th birthday. That point will come, sadly in not as long as I really feel comfortable with - in my head I'm a 37-year old non-binary-vibing woman with a whole future of exciting exploration of identity and media in front of me, whereas I'm clearly none of those things. Except the non-binary identity, obviously. I'm getting a bald patch. I'm irked.

Anyway, yes, Parkrun, so, the weather was 'not bad', I didn't feel like I had an excuse, so I felt I had no choice but to finally do my 50th Parkrun that I'd been trying to do since early December. And I had a reasonably easy run, not quick, and the early 60-something lady I'd been running the second lap with and who was also running her 50th Parkrun burned me off on lap 3 and I couldn't keep up, just to show you my level of fitness. I sprinted to the finish line, which meant I was a few seconds too quick to get a 50.0% Age Grading, which I'd been low-key trying to get for a while, in a continuation of my 'bang average' Parkrun stat aims.

But. At some point between leaving Parkrun and getting home, I started to sense I had an injury. There was a pain just above my left ankle, on the inside of my leg. It felt as if someone had whacked a specific point with something like a baseball bat. I'm fully aware my combination of dyspraxia and ADHD means there's a fair chance I could have banged my leg without noticing, because that's exactly the sort of thing that happens (I am the sort of person who gets random bruises, scrapes, and cuts), but honestly, I think I'd've noticed something that would cause that level of pain.

At the time of typing, some nine days later, I'm still not comfortable walking on it and it still hurts if I move my lower leg in particular ways. Obviously therefore I'm not going to be doing any of the weird stuff that Adriene does in her yoga sessions. Because she's not human even if I was fully fit. Equally obviously, I volunteered at Parkrun last Saturday. This upcoming weekend I'm in Nottinghamshire going drinking with my friend Tracey, and I had had the idea of going back to Sheffield Castle Parkrun (because the buses in England are only £2 per journey at the moment, so it's both cost-effective and convenient timewise, plus, Sheffield Castle, the perfect barefoot Parkrun, but I suspect that will not be happening. The Parkrun I mean, The drinking still will be,

obviously.

Speaking of Parkrun, I recently uploaded to my blog a post all about Queen's Parkrun, in Glasgow. It's a popular Parkrun, because it begins with 'Q', mainly, so I figured it would be useful to show people what to expect when they come here. At some point there'll be an associated video on YouTube but that requires my VA to 'do the necessary', because I don't do my video editing. And yes, I do even give a shoutout to barefoot Parkrunners (and note this will come up in a couple of upcoming Twitter Space Podcasts) in that post, because it's again something I think people will find useful.

With regard to video, it turns out that the weekend after I'm in Malta with Laura, there's a video creation workshop conference thing (called Keyframe) run by the oft-mentioned Traverse organisation. And after discussions with my VA (amongst others), the feeling was I ought to go to it even though I'm not that much of a video person. Because I'm not that much of a video person *yet*, and part of that is down to a lack of confidence and experience. So the hope and vibe is that by going, I can feel much more confident about using that medium.

Related, my VA gave me a task last week, to look at everything I do, and everything I want to do, and try to determine what things are more important to me in terms of very high-level concepts, And she didn't let me crowdsource it, because she said it had to be 'my' thoughts. Grumble grumble. But that said, once I managed to find mental time to sit down and write it, it was an interesting task, and made me realise two things: a) while I like writing, I'm not terribly fond of blogging, as I feel it stifles my creativity in ... ways that are quite nebulous but I know them when I try, but also b) it takes a lot more work to create a podcast episode than a YouTube video but the only reason it doesn't feel like it is because for the video I need to block out a fixed amount of time in my head to get down to do it, whereas a podcast can be done in dribs and drabs over a longer period. So part of my avoidance with video is the same as my avoidance with many things ADHD related - 'this needs to take 3 hours; I don't have the spell slots to spend 3 hours doing this one thing right now, so I'll do something else instead.' Listener, they never have the spell slots to spend 3 hours doing one thing solidly.

I do need to sit down and calculate how long it takes to do a podcast episode. I mentioned it in my recent 'things I wish I'd known before starting' episode but I suspect the answer is 'more hours than I imagine'.

But speaking of podcasts, let's start this episode!

{section separation jingle}

Okay, let's start this pod with a controversial statement: Everything you know about Detroit is wrong. Nothing like setting your stall out from the off, I guess. Well, not everything, but probably your first impression is. Certainly a couple of people I spoke to in Toronto were ... somewhat confused when I mentioned I was off there, as if to say 'why would you want to go there', 'it's not safe', and, 'well, rather you than me'. But that's exactly why I visit some places, to prove to the world that they're worth visiting. And Detroit is one of the biggest cities in the USA so there must be something to pull you in, right?

It's actually a city whose location I'm familiar with, if nothing else. It's possible Detroit airport is the airport I've been to the most often in North America, as in a previous lifetime I dated a woman who was at college near Lansing, and Detroit was the easiest airport to use to visit her. But long-time listeners already know about Dayna; she's appeared on a couple of my pods before (the ones on neurodiversity and myths/legends); first-time listeners note hers was the first voice you heard on this episode, and you'll hear more from her at the end of this ... paragraph. But with regard to the backstory, as a result of dating her, I got to know her college friends, a couple of whom lived in the Detroit hinterland, and I've passed through the area on separate visits to them. Indeed back in 2013 I had a couple of hours in downtown Detroit in the company of one of these friends (Kat) before heading off to the satellite town of Royal Oak for a drink. You'll hear more about Royal Oak later too, but probably not nearby Southfield where another of those friends (Carrie) lived at the time. I once caught a greyhound coach from Southfield into the centre of Detroit because ... it was easier than walking it.

The Dayna herself gave me a few pointers to Detroit, fortunately things I didn't know or hadn't been to. But here she gives a local's view of the city. I say local; she's originally from the nearby city of Port Huron, but that's close enough.

DAYNA: So, as a Michigan native, you're always kind of aware of Detroit. I know for myself for the longest time as a kid, I thought that was our state capital. It's not, by the way, that would be Lansing, but Detroit is a big fixture of Michigan. I would say it's gone down since the automotive industry has gone more overseas, but it's still a pretty bustling city and it's still well known. I'd say maybe not so much as a thriving city, but it's making a comeback.

So. Just over four years ago, which sounds like a long time but remember Covid ensured a year and a half of that kind of didn't really happen, I was in Detroit for a few days on my own. I'd just spent five days in Toronto meeting up with my twitter friend Vicki, from Orlando, and I figured Toronto seemed an awfully long way to travel to just spend five days somewhere – was there anywhere else I could visit nearby that would be interesting, and my gaze naturally fell on Detroit – only five hours away by greyhound coach, and thus maintaining my record of not having flown into the USA since, er, 2009 I think. I'm thus one of the few people who's never filled in an ESTA, much to the passive-aggressive annoyance of the border guards who have to then go through the rigmarole of giving me an I-94 visa waiver form to fill in, part of which needs to be handed back when I leave the country. Except that nobody ever wants it, so I end up throwing them away when I get back to the UK.

Anyway.

I arrived into Detroit at around 6.30pm; it was dark, and my AirBnB (a room inside someone's house) was about a mile and a bit away. Now, given these circumstances – dark evening, Detroit, coach stations are never in the best of areas – you'd be forgiven for thinking I'd grab a taxi. But no. I walked. Mainly to prove a point, I think. And this is the first thing I'd say about Detroit, and about personal safety. Risk is relative. At the time I presented as a 1m90 tall, hairy, middle-aged, middle-class, white man. You, well I know from some of my blog and listener stats, are not. I'm not going to tell you you will be safe walking through the streets of the downtown suburbs of Detroit at night – and indeed my AirBnB host told me that while she felt the streets were safe, she wouldn't walk them. All I can tell you is that I was.

The main problem I think with a lot of this part of Detroit, and it's something that's quite well-attested really, is that there's nothing here. There are whole blocks of dereliction; abandoned warehouses and factories, demolished plots that now serve as car parks, even basic waste ground; and this gives an impression that the place is more dangerous than it really is. Truth is, there's no-one around. No-one walks in this part of Detroit, so in a strange way it's safe by default.

That was an initial impression though. As I walked around the city more over the next four days, I did see sprouts of life. In the area between the greyhound station and the AirBnB for instance I came across what at the time were two new microbreweries (Detroit Brewing and Batch Brewing, at of which I bought a very apt t-shirt), a couple of churches, and a handful of other businesses.

And if you're going to take one thing out of a trip to Detroit, this would be it. This city is coming back, and don't you forget it.

One example of this is one of the most iconic buildings of Detroit, both visually and spiritually, and you could see it from my AirBnB. Michigan Central Railway Station was built at the start of the 20th Century, but closed in 1988. It's a grandiose building, thirteen stories high, rising to about 70m (Wikipedia tells me at the time it was the tallest railway station in the world - quite an odd title to hold since railway stations, by the very nature of railways, tend to be relatively flat; length and especially width tend to be the titles to aim for), and at its height served nearly 1.5 million passengers per year (which sounds like a lot, but it's about standard for an outer London suburban residential station. But then we use the trains more in this country). Until recently it's been a derelict hulk – vandalised, tagged, and scheduled for demolition at least twice. A couple of years ago however, it was bought by the Ford Motor Company (about whom more later) and is starting to be renovated into prime office space, preserving the look of the building. It would have been cool to have been able to have gone into it, especially given my passion for dead railway stations – a subject I might come on to in a future pod actually, or at least the idea of 'post-industrial archaeology' (I'm sure there's a better term for this), but alas everything was closed off and off-limits. I'm not an urban explorer, far too dyspraxic for that.

My personal observation about the station is ... it seems to have been an awfully long way out of the city centre (about 2 miles) to be of much practical use? Mind you, it stands just off Michigan Avenue, one of the prime radials coming out of downtown Detroit (headed almost due west), and these days lined with bars, cafes,

restaurants, and a baseball field. While the site is now used as the home ground of Detroit Police, it used to be a much bigger venue and home to the Detroit Tigers, the pre-eminent baseball team of the city. When Detroit slumped in the mid-80s, their sports teams moved out, but they're now all coming back - baseball is now played at Comerica Park on Woodward Avenue, one of the main arteries headed almost North towards Royal Oak, and one also lined with bars and restaurants and brewpubs.

As for the railway station; a "temporary" station was built some 20-30 years ago on the North side of the city, indeed a couple of miles down the same Woodward Avenue. It consists of a small 1980s brick structure and has precisely one platform (at its height, Michigan Central had 10). At the time I used it, you could catch one of the four or five trains a day here North to Royal Oak and Troy, or West to Chicago - there was also a rail replacement service to Toledo in Ohio from where you can pick up trains to Washington DC and all points East. There used to be a direct service, but apparently the residents of Royal Oak objected to trains passing through their town at high speed so petitioned Amtrak to slow them down to such an extent that Amtrak decided it wasn't worth their while keeping the timetable scheduled, so abandoned many of the services. Still, at least the beer's good in Royal Oak, eh?

Now.

When I came back home, and mentioned on Twitter that I'd been to Detroit, the reactions from my tweeps who knew about the place was quite uniform. Not "did you feel safe", of course, but rather "did you see the buildings?". To the uninitiated this may sound like an odd thing to say, but ...

At one point, Detroit was the third biggest city in the USA. It makes sense then that there would have been a large number of building projects in and around downtown; it just so happened that this coincided with the art-deco period of architecture. There are some absolutely stunning examples in the wider city, including the Fisher Building just north of the new railway station - a huge marble art-deco edifice -, the Penobscott Building in the very centre which, built at the same time, looks like it wouldn't be out of place in any of those contemporary black&white silent sci-fi movies, and, for something a bit more modern, the Ally Detroit Centre standing nearly 190m tall and looking like someone stuck a church organ on top of a skyscraper.

Getting around downtown is quite easy. For a nominal fee (on my visit it was 75 cents, that's probably gone up now) you can ride the People Mover indefinitely (I did three circuits!), an elevated monorail that loops around the downtown every 5-6 minutes and each loop takes around 17 and a half minutes. It's a great way to see the city from above, to get a feel for the size and layout of it, and while I rode it in 2013, I got the impression that quite a lot had changed in the city since then; new buildings, new styles. The people mover itself is a loop of just over 4.7km; in a way it's a shame it's an elevated train as it would make an awesome Parkrun. It was built in 1987, although something along the, er, lines, had been in the planning for some 20 years previously, with a series of Mass Transit ideas being brought forward and then rejected. What helped the construction of Detroit's People Mover was the involvement of a 'small' local business with a history in transportation, but ... yeh there's not much in the city that hasn't had the involvement of the Ford Motor Company to be honest.

On its own it's very much more for tourists than locals, as it covers a relatively small area and if you're working centrally it's just as easy to walk across town than catch the People Mover, but for tourists it's an awesome journey from where you can see much of the city below you from all sides, and helps you get a sense of what's here. Obviously it would be grand if it connected with a decent urban metro and local transport network, but I completely accept the USA is ... different to Europe in this regard.

But, this seems like a decent time to bring in the Ford Motor Company. Now, as you may know, Detroit is known as "The Motor City", and names like Pontiac, Cadillac, and Ford are all associated with the city. Out in Dearborn, the town to the West of Detroit itself and on the way to the airport, there is a whole complex devoted to Ford, including the Henry Ford Museum and an associated 'living village', the latter of which closes in winter and the former was just too big for me to justify seeing on my brief visit, but which certainly deserves the best part of a day. Henry Ford may be quite a dubious character in retrospect, but it can't be argued his influence on the city and wider region isn't significant.

Dayna, however, has had far more time in the area than I have.

DAYNA: Another cool Detroit place to go is the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village. It's kind of like two separate things that are .. well, the museum is indoors, the village is more of an outside exhibit, but the

museum features a 4k production theater, and shows scientific, natural or historical documentaries, as well as some major feature films. It also has some really cool exhibits – George Washington's camp bed, for example, Thomas Edison's alleged 'last breath', which is sealed in a glass tube. Thomas Edison is also a big Michigan thing, especially for my home town of Port Huron. We also have the 1961 Lincoln Continental that President John F Kennedy was riding in when he was assassinated. Along with assassinated presidents we also have the chair from Ford's Theater that President Lincoln was sitting in when he was shot. On a slightly more light-hearted note, we have the Oscar-Meier-Weinermobile, which is, if you've never seen, it's a giant hot dog as a car.

So, that's in the museum, Greenfield Village is a little bit different. It was open to the public back in June of 1933, and it was the first outdoor museum of its type in the nation, so that was kind of really cool bit of history, but when you go through it you can see different places that were basically picked up from where they were and transported to the museum, like the Wright Brothers' bicycle shop at home which was moved by Henry Ford in 1937 from Dayton, Ohio. Speaking of Abraham Lincoln, the courthouse where he practiced law is set up there as well. There's also a replica of Thomas Edison's Menlow Park laboratory from Jersey. It's just a really interesting museum, and both the indoor and the outdoor are definitely recommended. I went there several times as a kid, loved it, and also both generally through schools but also sometimes my friends would take me and it was always really really cool.

Now, obviously, in general, as befits one of the largest cities in the USA, Detroit has a strong historical legacy. Fortunately, the Detroit Historical Museum on Woodward Avenue (not too far from the existing Amtrak station) does a good job in condensing the city's history in an easy-to-follow format, over three floors.

The basement's highlight is a small recreation of the city streets at various points in history (including the late 19th Century), complete with shops and businesses that would have been present at the time. There's also a large model railway display that I ... may have spent a few minutes staring at and geeking over. Don't judge me!

The ground floor looks at the industrial history of Detroit, including a display that recreates the look/feel of the Ford assembly line concept. This is one of the things that 'made' Detroit – heavy industry, especially car manufacturing; it became a magnet for many different groups of people looking for decent work, and indeed even today one of the things that's notable about Detroit is its myriad of ethnicities – my AirBnB was in an area still called 'Corktown' because of the Irish influence, but these days its more noted for its Mexican restaurants. Elsewhere in Detroit are enclaves of Eastern Europeans, Africans, and Arabs (more about this latter point later).

It wasn't just cars that built Detroit, but other heavy industries too; iron, steel, engines, machine parts, and it led the USA in production of railroad cars and shipping. Indeed one of the largest at the turn of the 20th Century and one almost never mentioned now was 'stoves'. Detroit was probably the leading manufacturer of metallic stoves in the USA. Which I have to admit is not an industry I know a great deal about.

The rest of the Detroit Museum was mainly dedicated to the prior history of the city, including its foundation by the French (! - oh how history could have been so different; indeed the name itself is of French origin 'le détroit' – 'the straits' – referring to the narrow stretch of water that separates not only Detroit from Canada, but also two of the Great Lakes - Erie and Huron). It was founded by 'man with a subsequently familiar name' Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac who built a fort here. This fort grew to become one of the largest cities in the French-controlled 'Province of Quebec'. Until the British took it after the badly-named French And Indian War ended in 1763. While not part of the original Thirteen Colonies that obtained independence a few years later, the area was ceded to the USA by the British in 1796 in return for, you know, the British only needing to fight the French and not a Franco-American pact that would have jeopardised the Canadian colony. Oh how history could have been so different. Etc.

Around the museum are quotes and thoughts about the city from times past, including a rhyme popular on the East Coast from the 1820s which, referring to the fact it was quite an 'out of the way' place with not much around except swampland, went: "Don't go to Michigan, that land of ills; the Word means fever, ague, and chills". Which is nice, and I have been to both Traverse City and the UP, but it also suggests at that point no-one had been to Minnesota and fought with the mosquitoes.

Another, probably more typical of most cities in the USA at the time though, was from 100 years later, during

prohibition, where it was pointed out by local journalist Malcolm W Bingay, "it was absolutely impossible to get a drink in Detroit unless you walked at least ten feet and told the busy bartender what you wanted in a voice loud enough for him to hear you above the uproar". It reminds me of that famous ... I'mma call it a meme, but people have said it was cited in their textbooks, of how a prohibition agent (Izzy Einstein) went around various cities to see how long it took to get him a drink, and found it was usually measurable in minutes, except New Orleans where on arrival he took a taxi and asked the driver where he could get a drink, and the driver said 'right here' and handed him one. It must be said, however, Detroit's very location made it a convenient place for smugglers and bootleggers, since Canada is Just Over There. Indeed this wasn't the first time being so close to the Canadian border meant Detroit was an important place to be, but more of that later.

In addition, there's a series of display panels talking about famous historical figures from the city, including inventors George Hammond (rail refrigerator wagon, allowing easier transportation of fresh goods), and Elijah McCoy (prolific, but most noted for an automatic lubrication device for steam locomotives. And yes, it was so good people started referring to it as 'the real McCoy' as opposed to any of his competitors' products, hence the popular phrase).

Anyway. There are two parts of Detroit's history the museum dedicates specific parts to. One is the riots in July 1967. This is a part of history I know nothing about, because I'm British and they don't teach this stuff in school (also because when I went to school it wouldn't have been history, but that's a minor point). As such, remember as a complete outsider what I'm about to say may well be a very high-level and elementary school version that misses out a lot of nuance, but the reason I'm mentioning it at all, given that pretty much every city has had significant riots (I lived in Liverpool when the '81 Toxteth riots happened, though not in that bit of Liverpool), is because the '67 riots in Detroit were much more significant for Detroit than your average riot.

They started with a couple of policemen raiding an illicit bar. No, that's not true. They *started* with the background of the 1960s, and especially the Civil Rights movement. MLK gave a speech here in '63 that was one of his most famous and significant, and, for reasons I'll go into very shortly, Detroit has always had a significant Black population.

The actual police raid was on an unlicensed bar. 82 people were present and the police decided to arrest them all. A crowd gathered outside and became rowdy. A bottle was thrown. There was a scuffle. The crowd (generally seen as mixed race, on average) moved along and started looting.

What followed were about five days of riots, looting, and burning – the largest civil unrest in the USA for nearly 100 years. There are far more and better overviews and analysis of the riots out there, including, obviously, evidences of police brutality (specifically, not not limited to, an incident at the Algiers Motel which saw police kill three, injure several, and get away with it), but I'm mentioning it partly because it's seen as an important watershed in Detroit's history, and one of the reasons the city has the reputation it does amongst people, because that's what they were brought up knowing about the city, and also because of the concurrent and subsequent closure of many of the traditional industries due to, well, general world economics, meant many people's impressions of Detroit are of a city where everyone who can afford to leave, left, and what's left is a cultural and industrial wasteland.

Except it isn't. And that impression itself is partly caused by a background level of racism.

See, the other notable part of Detroit's history mentioned in the National Museum, but noted in more detail in the nearby 'African-American Museum', is its role in the era of slavery. The African-American Museum itself is a very thorough and detailed walk-through of the history of Africans and Africa as a whole, the slave trade, and the modern era, and how the role of Detroit was quite pivotal in that.

Obviously the industrial legacies of the city provided a reason why so many African-Americans came here; indeed the Ford Motor Company were one of the leading lights in integration. But of course a century earlier, in the days of slavery in The South, Detroit was known by the codeword of 'Midnight'. As the last US town that refugees from the slavery states would have to pass through before escaping to 'free' Canada, Detroit was a very popular destination on what was colloquially known as the 'underground railroad' – the logistics that were set up to allow escaping slaves to flee the country. The name 'midnight' came about because it was deemed easier to cross from Detroit to Windsor in Canada – a distance of less than a kilometre – under the cover of darkness (at 'midnight') so it was harder to spot you. In truth the hard part was getting to Detroit in the first place – as a

'free state' the locals were generally more than willing to help and harbour escapees despite the laws at the time. The museum goes into this in far more detail than a simple podcast produced by a British White Enby ever could.

The museum also celebrates African-American culture and performing arts, with displays around dance and theater, and how people have used their heritage and their skills to tell stories and try to change the world to be more accepting - after all, 'knowledge is power' and people are often scared of what they don't know. Such displays not only include examples of African-American textiles and performance, but also stained-glass representations and memorials to many famous figures from African-American history and culture.

One such was the subject of one the temporary exhibitions that most museums have, and I mention it here because it's important. At the time of my visit, there was a small exhibition on Aretha Franklin; arguably one of the most famous and notable people to emerge from Detroit in recent times. She'd recently passed away, and this was a way of honouring her, with the story of her life and displays of some of the clothes she'd worn on stage, and all manner of other things I did not know. It was very intense and powerful, I must say. One of the most popular musicians of all time, but then equally just one of many from the period and the time. Detroit is a city noted for music, and has spawned such diverse acts as the White Stripes, Madonna, Aaliyah (who today I learned was herself the niece of pop stalwart Gladys Knight), and technically Alice Cooper, though he rose to musical success in Arizona, of all the different places. But going back to Gladys Knight for a sec; she (and her group the Pips) was one of the many notable artists associated with the music that probably defines the city of Detroit the most. Motown.

I mean. Y'all know Motown, right? Y'all've heard of the record label that defined an entire genre of music? So, obviously I'd heard of Motown, but even from someone born as long ago as I, I always associated it exclusively with 1960s pop & soul, music from before I was born. As it happens, the label still exists, they're part of Universal Music Group, based in Santa Monica California, and one of their leading lights now is the R&B megastar Ne-Yo. But yes, Motown, as most people know it, is indeed very much 60s Detroit.

It was founded in 1958 by Berry Gordy, originally as Tamla Records; the Motown moniker was added two years later, from Detroit's nickname as 'The Motor City'. (As an aside, they were two different labels; the Motown organisation as a whole owned and ran several different record labels in name only, for administrative reasons, they all used the same HQs and recording studio, but Gordy's 'loophole abuse' of the broadcasting industry is beyond the scope of this pod). He'd bought a house in 1959 on the north side of the city and converted part of it into a small recording studio, so essentially he 'worked from home' before it was cool. This house became the base for Motown for much of the 60s, until he moved to LA, partly as a direct result of the '67 Detroit Riot. The building is colloquially known as 'Hitsville USA' after the sheer dominance the Motown label had in pop music, most of which was recorded here.

Now, Barry's older sister Esther didn't move, staying at home there, and a little under 20 years later she turned it into a museum. And though it's not a huge building it's quite impressive what you can see inside it. Obviously there's still a whole array of photographs, costumes, documents from the period, etc, but that's not the main draw.

The tour takes you into Berry Gordy's apartment and the label's offices, so you can see exactly at first hand how he lived and worked, complete with period displays. There's also an overview of many of the artists who recorded here, which is a veritable who's who of iconic pop - think Stevie Wonder, the Supremes, Marvin Gaye, the Four Tops, the Temptations, and of course the Jackson Five. But not Aretha Franklin, surprisingly; her manager/father turned them down because he felt they were too new and not big enough. To be fair this was 1960, and I guess with hindsight neither party suffered badly from that rejection.

However the big draw is a visit to Studio A. The actual room where these artists made their music. There's the original instruments and recording equipment here so you can literally see and feel how it would have been to step into the metaphorical shoes of people you grew up listening to (there's even a worn shoeprint in the floor as the producers kept the beat by tapping their feet), how they must have felt recording and being recorded, and what it was like for the sound engineers and producers too. It's actually quite something to be so close to history - something you don't quite get a vibe for in many similar places where you might even only see things through windows in closed doors. Here you can literally walk up to a microphone and start singing. I did not do this.

Nor did I play on the famous Motown Grand Piano, used by the Funk Brothers backing session band on many of the Motown hits. The tour guide said that one previous Englishman on a tour had indeed done that, but I suspect you can get away with a lot of things when you're Paul McCartney.

African-American culture isn't the only one to have dedicated museums in the Detroit area. Revelling in the diverse makeup of this city, another ethnicity to have its own museum is the Arab diaspora; nearby Dearborn, on the way to the airport and the Ford Museum sites, hosts what may well be the only Arab-American museum in the USA. It was opened in 2005 and serves both as an actual museum for the general public, and as a library of resources (literary, oral, artistic) for researchers and historians.

The museum is divided into different sections, and the entryway on the ground floor is a large open marble-floored area filled with Arabic tiling and geometrical patterns. There's a dome above it, and the whole thing is designed to have the vibe of a mosque or other Arabic building.

It contains several sections; one (mainly centred in the entrance hall) explains what being Arab means, including an overview of the Arab world, a quick overview of Arab achievements and innovations (especially around medicine, mathematics, and astronomy), and examples of typical Arabic musical instruments.

The other sections are all largely made up of walk-in dioramas and information boards depicting different parts of the Arab American immigration journey, and displays of items owned by immigrants. One shows the journey of immigration to the USA, and how it's changed over the centuries, including where people come from, how people immigrate, and why they choose to leave their home countries and come to the USA. Another looks at immigrant life in the USA; what they did when they got here in terms of work, home life, etc. There's also information on how they maintained their Arab heritage in their new country. Unsurprisingly this includes a lot of food, but also about businesses they ran etc. The final section is dedicated to individual Arab Americans who have made an impact on the local, national, or international stage. Examples I seem to have taken pics of include Dr Abdallah E Najjar, who was instrumental in the fight against Malaria in the post-WW2 period, and Rana El Kaliouby, who created and developed an app which recognises emotions in faces by tracking minute changes in facial expressions.

Wikipedia tells me Dearborn itself is the city with the highest proportion of Muslims in the USA, but it doesn't tell me how many. A quick search brings up a Medium article from 2017 which suggests it's just under 30%. It does have the largest mosque in the USA though, which seems fitting. Also, just over 40% of the population of Dearborn in the 2010 census self-defined as having 'Arab Ancestry'. It seems many of these are specifically Lebanese, so it's befitting the last meal I had in the area before catching my flight home was at a Lebanese restaurant a couple of doors down from the museum. Rice, yoghurt chicken, and salad. Nice.

Another satellite town of Detroit is the previously-mentioned Royal Oak. It's north of Detroit, beyond the famous 8-mile road, which is the only time I'm going to reference that in this pod. On the edge of Royal Oak is Detroit Zoo. I'm noting this not because I've been there, but because Dayna has.

DAYNA: And there are several places in Detroit that are really interesting. One of them is Detroit Zoo. It was always a staple for me growing up; as a family trip we would normally take once a year to go to the zoo. Schools, also, obviously will also access the zoo, I remember it was always big trip that we would take now and again, it was always a very special treat. It's situated on about 125 acres of naturalistic exhibits, and it's home to more than 2500 animals representing 235 species. It was also the first zoo in the United States to bar-less exhibits extensively. So it's always really cool to visit. I highly recommend the penguin exhibit, I don't know if they still have it as it was when I was a kid, obviously that was 30+ years ago, but you would go into this building, it was very cool, and you could see the penguins swimming and diving and it was always just really cool.

My knowledge of Royal Oak consists primarily of several pubs, obviously, which I was taken to by our mutual friend Kat, who lived in the area at the time. And it has a huge thrift store. And a railway station which we both used once to catch a train to, er, Detroit. [We were heading to Philadelphia to meet with Dayna, but we had to catch the rail replacement bus to Toledo before an overnight train to Washington DC. One day I might do a podcast on trains.]

As you might have gathered, Detroit is a place where I can definitely grab a decent beer or two. It's also a wonderful place for street art; I think it's all connected – I mean I'm not saying Detroit is an upcoming hipster city, though it is that too, and it must be said the couple of days I spent in Seattle the previous year were also very pleasant for similar reasons. Conversely I found Portland Oregon to be a tad overrated and a bit pretentious tbh. But back to Detroit. There's a lot of large murals and street art to be found in the city, if that's your thing, especially on the way down Michigan Avenue in fact. Street Art is the subject of an upcoming pod though so I'll talk more about it there.

So Detroit. Lot of history. Lot of culture. Bad reputation caused by things in the past, and definitely a city in its post-industrial phase. Actually similar to Glasgow, but with less consistent weather. In 2015 Detroit was designated a UNESCO Design City – a designation for cities around the world which are noted for their design and culture industry – think architecture, urban planning, public spaces, that sort of thing, and where creative design industries (think interiors, fashion, jewellery, and also sustainable environment and urban design) are central to their vibe. There's only 40 in the world, and Detroit is the only one in the USA. For the Brits, there is one in the UK and we could sit here for hours playing that game and you still wouldn't get it. Ditto for Australia.

I really enjoyed my time in the city, and I could certainly see an appeal for me there. It's never lauded as much as neighbouring Chicago, despite having so much in it that would appeal to tourists and visitors with all kinds of interests, from music to museums, sport to street art. I'd say leave your prejudices at the airport and come visit.

And if you don't like it? I mean, Canada's literally just 'over there'. But why would you want to do that, eh?

{end main body podcast jingle}

Well, that's about all for this episode. Join me next time for another adventure beyond the brochure. Until then, remember, you heard it through the podcast-vine, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}